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## **The impact of a religious opera on a secular audience: The existential and religious importance of art**

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### **Abstract**

What role does art play in the life of contemporary, secularized people who are looking for existential and spiritual meaning? This was the leading question in our empirical research on the opera “Dialogues of the Carmelites” by the French composer, Francis Poulenc. First, we will sketch the philosophical debate about the relationship between religion, transcendence and art, and give a conceptual clarification of the terms existential, spiritual and religious. Second, we will present the results of our research. We studied the actual impact of the opera as performed in the Amsterdam Opera House in March 2002. We focused on the intentions of the creators and performers of the opera, and on the reception by the public. By means of a questionnaire, interviews and analysis of reviews, we examined what feelings and associations this explicitly religious opera evoked in a secular context. It is concluded that art can make people sensitive to existential questions and to a broad spirituality, in the sense of opening up to “transcendence.”

### **Introduction**

Since the work of Paul Pruyser (1983), a lively interest in the psychology of religion has been directed towards art and capacities such as creativity, imagination and symbolization.<sup>1</sup> The process of assigning religious meaning is fanning out in all directions, and is increasingly becoming a matter of personal appropriation. In this context, aesthetic experiences are gaining importance, and similarities between art and religion are being mapped.

According to the American philosopher, John Dewey (1934/1980), the aesthetic experience can introduce us to a world beyond this world, and the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. A recurring theme in studies on art and the relationship between art and religion is this critical potential of art to open up new dimensions, to broaden the human perspective and to point to new possibilities of giving form to human

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<sup>1</sup>The study of art and imagination was first approached from a psychoanalytic, in particular object-relational, perspective (see Britton, 1998; Jongsma-Tieleman, 1996; Parsons, 2000; Pruyser, 1983; Raab, 2000; Rudnytski, 1993; for a general discussion, see Beit-Hallahmi, 1989; Van der Lans, 1998).

existence. It is stressed that art affirms reality, while at the same time revolting against the world's lies, injustice and suppression of beauty. In this way, art transcends reality to reach new forms. It introduces something strange to our world, which enables us to relate to it in a new way.<sup>2</sup> This happens only when we are touched by something we cannot control; by something that transcends our usual perspective. In Schachtel's view, both religion and art have the potential to evoke the "longing for transcendence" in us. According to George Steiner (1989), the arts are the medium of our "neighbourhood to the transcendent" (p. 215). "It is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and 'the other'" (ibid, p. 227).

Related to this question of art and transcendence is the potential of art to make us sensitive to existential questions. According to Funch (1997), the aesthetic experience occurs when the work of art articulates an existential theme that is relevant in the context of the biography of the person. Taylor (1989) refers to a similar theme when he discusses the moral and spiritual significance that is attached to art in our time. People have the sense "that in it lies the key to a certain depth, or fullness, or seriousness, or intensity of life, or to a certain wholeness ... for many of our contemporaries art has taken something like the place of religion" (p. 422). Yet, the relationship between art and religion in modern times is more complex than a mere substitution. Gadamer (1986) is concerned to show the continuity of art and religion, for example by describing the emergence of theatre from the context of religious life. One of the characteristics of theatre is that it affects unification at a distance, because all spectators are onlookers at the same event. Originally, Greek theatre was part of religious festive celebrations that had the power to elevate participants into a transformed state of being. Contemporary theatre still has a festive character about it. "... theater, like cultic ceremony, also represents a genuine creation: something drawn from within ourselves takes shape before our eyes in a form that we recognize and experience as a more profound presentation of our own reality" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 60). This is a mimetic representation that presents a transformed reality "because it brings before us intensified possibilities never seen before. Every imitation is an exploration, an intensification of extremes" (ibid, p. 64). We are confronted with the fundamentals of human existence. In any encounter with art, man experiences the totality of the experienceable world, his ontological place in it, and his finitude before that which transcends him.

Different types of theatre are characterized by different degrees of unity of onlookers and players. Yet, it is characteristic of theatre as a form of play that it demands participation by everyone. Play is a communicative activity that does not really acknowledge the distance separating player and onlooker. The onlooker has to "play along," he has to answer the challenge the play issues, and he has to understand what it intends. This, according to Gadamer, requires profound intellectual and spiritual activity that is rewarded by a transformation in the feeling about life. "If we really have had a genuine experience of art, then the world has become both brighter and less burdensome" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 26).

What enables us to participate in theatre in this way? How can we understand this potential of art to evoke the longing for transcendence and to sensitize us to existential questions? Can we assume that art still has this potential in present times, where art is met by a secular audience and functions apart from daily life? In this article, we present the results of our

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Arnheim (1966), Gadamer (1986), Maas (1997), Schachtel (1959/1984), Taylor (1989), and Van Gennep (1987).

empirical study on the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*, as presented by The Dutch Opera in the Amsterdam Opera House in March 2002.<sup>3</sup> This opera has a complex and interesting genesis. The composer, Francis Poulenc, based his libretto (*Dialogues des Carmélites*, 1957/1983) on a play of the same name by Georges Bernanos (1949), which in turn is based on the novelette *The Song at the Scaffold* by Gertrud Von Le Fort (1931/1993). Notwithstanding the historical setting of the French Revolution, the content of the opera is surprisingly modern. It concerns general human, existential issues such as shame and guilt, overcoming anxiety and doubt, the spiritual search for meaning in life, and the limits of human solidarity. In a former article, we described our content analysis of the opera, using a relational-psychoanalytic theoretical frame (E. G. Schachtel, E. H. Erikson and D. W. Winnicott; see Alma, & Zock, 2001). In this article, we focus on the intentions of the creators and performers of the opera, and the reception by the public. Von Le Fort, Bernanos and Poulenc make their religious intentions with the opera clear, but how do present-day performers and their public take them up? This was the leading question in our explorative research, which we tried to answer by studying literature on its creation, by interviewing performers and asking the audience to fill in a questionnaire, and by studying reviews in newspapers.

We will proceed as follows. After clarifying our use of the terms “existential,” “spiritual” and “religion,” we will present the research, and end with a conclusion.

### Conceptual clarification

We will first explain the term “existential” as used in this article. In France after the Second World War, the time of the genesis of the opera, existentialism was an important movement. Bernanos’s work is considered to be of a Christian existentialist slant (Mounier, 1953). Given this historical context, we will use an existentialist concept of “existential” here, in the sense of “ultimate concerns”: the givens of human existence, concerns rooted in the individual’s existence. In the tradition of existentialist philosophical thinking, the psychotherapist Irvin D. Yalom (1980) distinguishes four ultimate concerns: death, freedom (including the issues of responsibility and choice), isolation and meaninglessness. As we will see, all themes are present in *Dialogues*: “death” in the fear of death and dying of the protagonist Blanche, the prioress and finally all the nuns; “freedom” in the issue of making the right choice, becoming who you are and who God wants you to be, and in the dilemma of establishing yourself vs. surrendering to God; “isolation” in the loneliness of the anxious Blanche, the dying prioress, and the emphasis on dying together; and, finally, “meaninglessness” in the search for meaning in martyrdom, in not living up to one’s identity and ideals.

From this perspective, we can better understand the potential of art to sensitize us to existential questions: works of art present ultimate concerns, and thus may bring us into contact with personal psychological and existential truth. Yalom (1980) states that the great writers

no less fully than their professional brethren explored and explicated existential issues . . . Great literature survives (as Freud already argued) . . . because something in the reader leaps out to embrace its truth. The truth of fictional characters moves us because it is our own truth. Furthermore, great works of literature teach us about ourselves because they are scorchingly honest, as honest as any clinical data: the great novelist, however his or her personality may be split among many characters, is ultimately highly self-revelatory. (p. 21)

<sup>3</sup>*Dialogues des Carmélites* in the production of The Dutch Opera was directed by Robert Carsen and conducted by Yves Abel. Performances took place in the Amsterdam Opera House (the “Muziektheater”) in 1997 and 2002.

The Dutch psychotherapist and theologian, Agneta Schreurs, states that great literature and drama may play an important role in existential and spiritual awakening because it minimizes daily worries and magnifies and intensifies the existential aspect (Schreurs, 2002, p. 143).

It is more difficult to ascertain the precise relationship between existential issues and religion. Nobody will deny that religion may have an existential impact, but to what extent are religious and existential issues connected? This question becomes especially relevant in a secular time, when the spheres of meaning in life and religion are growing apart. Schreurs offers a sensible view in this respect. She links existential consciousness with an inner core of personality which she calls, following existentialist thinkers, “the True Self”—“This is a matter of who I truly am” (ibid, 2002, p. 140). An existential dilemma involves being true to one’s ultimate identity. She links this “I-am” experience with spirituality and religion in the following way: Religion refers to how a community deals with the transcendent. Spirituality refers to the personal, relational aspect of religion. “It is about an individual’s inner life, his ideals and attitudes, thoughts and feelings and prayers towards the Divine, and about how he expresses these in his daily way of life” (ibid, p. 25), that is, how an individual is connected with God, “or however one conceives of the transcendent Being” (ibid, p. 141). So, existential themes, in Schreurs’s view, become spiritual when a person’s ultimate concerns imply involvement with God.<sup>4</sup> Every spiritual experience is also an existential experience, but not every existential experience is necessarily a spiritual one. However, the two may be seen as even more closely connected than Schreurs sketches. In line with Gadamer and the other authors mentioned in the introduction, we hold that existential experiences already imply an awareness of transcendence. They open up to other dimensions of existence, transcending daily life experiences and human finitude.

## The opera and its context

### *Presentation of the opera*

The historical setting of *Dialogues* is a specific event in the French Revolution: the execution at the scaffold of 16 Carmelite nuns in Paris on 17 July 1794. The protagonist is the novice Blanche, a girl of noble birth, who is tormented by anxieties. To escape from her anxious existence, she decides to enter the Carmelite convent. Serious events, however, force her to confront her anxiety right there. First, she has to witness the terrible death struggle of the prioress, Madame de Croissy, who recognized in Blanche her soulmate, and favoured her above others. Second, the nuns suffer from increasing harassment by the revolutionary regime, which does not allow them to keep to their faith. Urged on by the brave and ambitious Mother Marie, the nuns take a vow of martyrdom. After this, Blanche panics and runs away from the convent. She takes refuge in her former home, as the servant of the new occupants. Her sisters are driven from the convent and go to live in Paris. After a visit from Mother Marie, Blanche also goes to Paris, arriving there at the very moment her sisters are being executed at the guillotine, singing the “Salve Regina.” When only her co-novice, Constance, is left, Blanche emerges from the crowd to join her at the scaffold, thus affirming her own identity as a Carmelite nun.

The opera has an explicitly religious character. It is situated in a convent run according to the strict rule of the Carmel. In the libretto, we are confronted with a traditionally Roman

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<sup>4</sup>It must be noted that Schreurs leaves room for different ways of conceiving “the transcendent Being,” but in her elaboration of the concept, she closely relates transcendence to a personal and Christian conception of God.

Catholic theology of Jesus' death on the cross, of substitution and martyrdom, grace and redemption. In the Amsterdam production, we see nuns wearing habits, and on the stage, people are praying, mass is celebrated, and traditional songs of the Virgin Mary are sung. The Catholic roots of the opera come strongly to the fore. Further, the composer Poulenc, as well as the authors Bernanos and Von Le Fort, were personally involved in the subject to a high degree, wrestling with anxiety and making life choices (Alma, & Zock, 2001, pp. 177–179). Von Le Fort, a Catholic convert writing in the 1920s in Germany, was afraid of not being able to face the threat of the Nazis. She writes in her memoirs: "In an historical sense, she [Blanche] did not exist, but received the breath of her trembling being directly from my own personality" (quoted in Gendre, 1999, pp. 278–279). Bernanos's play, written during the last year of his life, when he was already ill, may be considered as his literary and spiritual testament (quoted in *ibid*, p. 284). We will focus here on the personal background of Poulenc and his intentions with the opera.

### *Francis Poulenc—the biographical context*

It is quite interesting that Poulenc (France, 1899–1963) chose the secular form of opera for a piece of work that is entirely religious. This interweaving of the secular and the religious is typical of Poulenc—at least for his later work. Being the son of a "secular" mother and a "religious" father, he puts his own religiosity down to the inheritance from his father. However, in his life and work, religion comes to the fore only after 1936, after a religious experience in Rocamadour, a French place of pilgrimage. He visited this place a few days after he heard about the death of the composer, Pierre Octave Ferroud, a death that made a deep impression on him. Later, he declared that Rocamadour had restored to him the faith of his childhood. On the same evening of his visit to the Black Virgin of Rocamadour, he started with the composition of his first religious work: *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*. "In that month of August 1936, Poulenc was definitely touched by the divine grace."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout his life, Poulenc was strongly interested in literature and painting. He set many works of poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Eluard to music. "Musicians teach me techniques. It is writers and artists who provide me with ideas." (quoted in Buckland & Chimènes, 1999b, p. 4). Hence, Poulenc is considered to be a good example of the cross-fertilization of the arts in France in the first half of the 20th century, fusing music, literature and painting (*ibid*). Poulenc stated that he "wanted to paint musically" (*ibid*, p. 1), and the thematic content of his musical works was very important to him. This was evident in his careful choice of literary texts for his librettos. He chose them "after a constant quest" (Waleckx, 1999a). Alongside the quality of the text, the thematic content and the type of characters introduced were important criteria for him. In his librettos, he focuses on the psychological evolution of the protagonists rather than on historical action and circumstances (*ibid*, p. 261). When he was looking for a text on which to base a new lyrical work in 1953, Bernanos's play attracted him immediately. "The play is made for me" he exclaimed. He liked the content as well as the verbal rhythm and began working on the libretto in a frenzy. He had met Bernanos a few times, and confesses to have always admired him and to sharing the same religious concepts as Bernanos (*ibid*, p. 266, n. 272). "His conception of the spiritual is exactly my own and his violent side is in perfect accord with a whole side of my nature, be it in pleasure or in ascetism" (Gendre, 1999, p. 316, n. 77). There was clearly a spiritual affinity between the men.

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<sup>5</sup>"Assurément, Poulenc fut, en ce mois d'août 1936, touché par la grâce" (Machart, 1995, p. 104).

Moreover, it was also Poulenc's life circumstances that attracted him to *Dialogues*. In 1954, Poulenc became severely depressed and had to refrain from working for a time. From then on, he suffered from periods of depression—which, however, did not hinder his work on the opera. Poulenc admitted that his own fear of illness played a role in the attraction (Waleckx, 1999a, p. 266). His friend and colleague Bernac wrote: "These ladies of Compiègne are certainly linked to that deep crisis. If Blanche de la Force and the first prioress have had a part in awakening his own fear of death, this can be explained at least partly by the intensity with which he succeeded in calling them alive. On some evenings, when he played his opera to friends, he nearly reached a state of trance."<sup>6</sup> The identification with his heroines points to the prevalent theme of femininity in Poulenc's work. Women are central in almost all of his stage works, while his songs are written mainly for the male voice. Denis Waleckx argues that it is worth considering that Poulenc, "by systematically identifying with his female characters, may have been exploring his own share of femininity" (Waleckx, 1999b, p. 321).

His emotional crisis during the work on *Dialogues* was also related to the problematic relationship with his lover, Lucien Roubert. They separated in 1954, but a year later they came together again, when it became apparent that Roubert had pleuritis. He would die in 1955 before the first presentation of *Dialogues*, on January 26, 1957, in the Scala of Milan. After Roubert's death, Poulenc explicitly identified with him in the context of the play. He states that Roubert had died in his place, like the first prioress in the place of Blanche. And he acknowledges Roubert as the inspiration behind *Dialogues* and his *Stabat Mater* (Gendre, 1999, p. 316).

During his difficulties, Poulenc sought solace with the Carmelite order. He found spiritual support with the Carmelite Father Griffin in Dallas, and corresponded with the Carmelites in Compiègne. During Roubert's terminal illness, he asked the Reverend Mother of the Carmel in Compiègne in a letter to pray for him. And earlier, he stated in a letter to the composer Pierre Bernac: "I have entrusted him to my sixteen blessed Carmelites: may they protect his final hours since he has been so closely involved in their story" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 306). Poulenc believed in the mediating powers of saintly figures. Just as the Virgin Mary may intercede on our behalf, a Christian can pray for the salvation of another Christian and obtain for them a singular grace. This is a central theme in *Dialogues*, as Poulenc makes clear: "If it is a work about anxiety, it is equally, and in my opinion primarily, a work about grace and the mediation of grace."<sup>7</sup>

It will be clear that *Dialogues* is a highly personal work, in which Poulenc's experiences with death, illness, and relationships, and with his religious and professional inspiration, were closely interconnected.

### Empirical research

The leading questions in the explorative research of the Amsterdam production are:

1. To what extent are Poulenc's intentions understood and taken up by performers and audience?

<sup>6</sup>"Ces dames de Compiègne ne sont certainement pas étrangères à cette grande crise. Si Blanche de la Force et la première Prieure lui ont transmis leur crainte de la mort, on peut au moins l'expliquer en partie par l'intensité avec laquelle il a réussi à les faire revivre. Certains soirs lorsqu'il jouait son opéra pour des amis il arrivait à être presque dans un état de transe" (quoted in Chimènes, 1983, p. 31).

<sup>7</sup>"Si c'est une pièce sur la peur, c'est également et surtout, à mon avis, une pièce sur la grâce et le transfert de la grâce" (quoted in Roy, 1983, p. 35).

2. What is the effect of the opera on audience and performers?
3. Are people being affected on the existential, spiritual and religious level?
4. Does this religious-existential opera bring a modern secularized opera-audience into contact with religious meanings?

### Method

At the performance of *Dialogues des Carmélites* in the Amsterdam Opera House in March 2002, we conducted research among audience and performers.<sup>8</sup> At two of the performances, the audience was asked to complete a short questionnaire, distributed at the entrance immediately after ticket check, to be filled in preferably after the performance or alternatively during the interval. Each evening, there were  $\pm 1400$  spectators, and a total of 1600 questionnaires were distributed on the two evenings. The response was about 32% (total of 511 questionnaires were returned). The questionnaire contained questions about age, gender, religious commitment and religious affiliation; an open question ("What appealed to you most in this opera?"); and a list of 16 emotional values ("To what extent is each of the following concepts in keeping with what the opera evokes in you?") that could be scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 2 = hardly, 3 = a bit, 4 = a lot).<sup>9</sup>

Further, we interviewed the director, Robert Carsen (by phone, 20 min); the conductor, Yves Abel; and five of the singers: Judith Forst ("Madame de Croissy," the first prioress), Gwynne Geyer ("Madame Lidoine," the second prioress), Kathryn Harries ("Mother Marie"), Claron McFadden ("Sister Constance") and Marcel Reijans ("The Knight," Blanche's brother). Unfortunately, Susan Chilcott (protagonist "Blanche") was not available for interview. The length of the interviews, which were tape-recorded, was approximately 1 h, and leading questions were: How do you experience co-operating in an opera like this one, which concentrates on existential and religious themes? How do you perceive the reaction of the audience? What are the particular problems and challenges of your role or part in the opera?

Finally, we studied the reviews of the production collected by the Amsterdam Opera House. We studied eight reviews that had appeared in both national and regional newspapers, and two larger articles on the background and content of the opera in national periodicals.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>See note 3.

<sup>9</sup>We have chosen to focus on the emotional impact of the opera, and not on its truth value and religious validity, because of our theoretical presupposition that in a pluralistic and individualistic society personal appropriation of cultural traditions is becoming increasingly important. Being personally touched, moved, is a prerequisite for acquiring religious meanings (cf. object-relations theory and constructionist models of identity development; see Alma, 1998; Alma, & Zock, 2001; Van der Lans, 1998; Zock, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>The following reviews were studied: Spel, M., March 5, 2002, "Devoot onthoofde nonnen," *NRC Handelsblad*; Ven, A. van der, March 5, 2002, "Zachte droefheid in opera van Poulenc," *Haagsche Courant*; Lint, P. van der, March 6, 2002, "Pure beeldpoëzie van Carsen in 'Dialogues des Carmélites'," *Trouw*; Oorschot, G. van, March 6, 2002, "Rillingen bij reutelende doodstrijd," *de Volkskrant*; Hazendonk, R., March 7, 2002, "Beklemmend non-nendrama in Muziektheater," *De Telegraaf*; Voermans, E., March 8, 2002, "Indrukwekkende stervende nonnen," *Het Parool*; Visser, H., March 8, 2002, "'Dialogues des Carmélites' verdient een groot publiek," *Noordhollands Dagblad*; March 16, 2002, "Reprise van de week," *Vrij Nederland*. The articles studied were Cohen-Rohleder, I., February 22, 2002, "De mystiek van een bang haasje: Karmelietessen zingend onder de guillotine," *De Bazuin*, 24–26; Korenhof, P., February, 2002, "Dialogues des Carmélites," *Encore*, 58–61.



Table I. Religious involvement, church membership and denominations.

	N	%
Religious involvement		
No	305	60
Yes	189	37
Missing	17	3
Church membership		
No	340	67
Yes	165	32
Missing	6	1
Denomination		
Non-church	340	67
Roman Catholic	72	14
Protestant Churches in the Netherlands	41	8
Other	52	10
Missing values	6	1

### Results

*Audience.* We wanted to find out, among other things, what the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*, with its religious themes, evoked in the supposedly secular audience of the Amsterdam Opera House. We measured the degree of religiosity among the audience with two questions: “Do you feel religiously involved?” and “Are you a member of a religious community?”. The majority of the audience did not feel religiously involved (62%) and were not members of a religious community (67%). Religious involvement and membership of a religious community did not necessarily go together: 35% of the people who felt religiously involved were not members of a religious community. Conversely, 23% of the people who were members of a religious community did not feel religiously involved. Of the several religious denominations in the Netherlands, Roman Catholics were best represented among the opera audience (Table I).

It may be concluded that we can justly speak of a secular audience. Sixty-seven per cent of our sample were not members of a religious community, whereas this is true for approximately 60% of the Dutch population as a whole (Becker, & De Wit, 2000, pp. 13–14, 59). The degree of secularization becomes even greater when the average age of the respondents is taken into account: 55, with 33% older than 60. According to the most recent data available concerning the Dutch population (from 1999), in the generation born between 1930 and 1944, 46% have no church affiliation. In our sample, 62% of this age group was not a member of a religious community. It is very unlikely that this difference is solely due to changes between 1999 and 2002.<sup>11</sup>

To find out what the opera evoked in people, we presented 16 concepts to the spectators, together with the question of to what extent each of these were in keeping with what the opera evoked in them. Most of all, the opera was felt to be moving<sup>12</sup> and meaningful. Our conjecture that a secular audience might think the opera strange because of its highly traditional religious content was not supported at all: for only 26% of the sample was this slightly or strongly the case, independent of religious involvement and membership of a religious community (Table II).

<sup>11</sup>It is rather difficult to compare data about religious involvement because this variable is operationalized in very different ways in the studies available.

<sup>12</sup>In the Conclusion, we will point out that “being moved” is the pre-eminent characteristic of both aesthetic and religious emotions.

Table II. Emotional impact of the opera (4-point Likert-type scale).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moving	3.54	0.72
Meaningful	3.40	0.77
Religiously meaningful	3.33	1.01
Theatrical	3.17	1.01
Can you empathize with it?	3.15	0.95
Spiritually meaningful	3.09	0.97
Sad	2.99	0.99
Existentially meaningful	2.96	1.07
Gloomy	2.96	1.01
Appealing	2.57	1.16
Contemporary	2.55	1.07
Beneficial	2.33	1.01
Comforting	2.30	1.06
Hopeful	2.22	1.03
Neurotic	1.91	1.02
Strange	1.83	0.95

Table III. Most appealing element of the opera.

Element	<i>N</i>	%
Music and direction	233	46
Death prioress/other nuns	81	16
Content—non-religious	101	20
Content—religious	17	3
Atmosphere	13	2
Other	17	3
Missing values	49	10

Besides the concepts presented by us, people could answer an open question concerning what appealed to them most in the opera. Music and direction are mentioned most often. Themes regarding the content of the opera are mentioned by 39% of the sample, when we include in this category answers concerning the dying hours of the first prioress in the first scene, and of the other nuns at the end of the opera. The remaining answers concerning content were divided into two groups: religious and non-religious. Examples of religious answers include “Man needs a loving father in heaven,” “The human struggle and his relation to God,” “Submission to God’s will and the happiness this brings with it,” “Faithfulness to one’s vow, deep faith, identifying with the death agony of Jesus,” “Passion and redemption.” Examples of non-religious answers include “Strength of people to grow in difficult situations,” “No longer being afraid of death,” “Simplicity and friendship,” “The conflict of values,” “Choosing fate in the story.” These examples make clear that many of what we call “non-religious” answers can be labelled as “religious” in the broader sense concerning existential questions<sup>13</sup> (Table III).

Men and women did not differ significantly in what appealed to them most, and nor did the different age groups in our sample. As mentioned earlier, the average age of the respondents was high: 55 years, with highs and lows of 92 and 20 years, respectively. Significant

<sup>13</sup>Cf. the conceptual clarification of the relationship between “existential” and “religious” issues above. Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis (1993, p. 8) even equate the two: “We shall define religion as *whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die*” (italics in the original).

Table IV. Most appealing element of the opera  $\times$  religious involvement (percentage).

	Non-involved	Involved
Music and direction	57.6	37.9
Content	37.3	54.0
Other	5.1	8.0
Total	100	100

Pearson Chi-square 0.000.

differences in what appeals most to people are to be found between the group of respondents who are religiously involved and the remainder of the sample. Those religiously involved more often gave an answer with respect to content; those not religiously involved more often mentioned music and direction. The same pattern emerges when we compare the group of respondents who were members of a religious community with those not religiously affiliated. Thus, in this respect, the religiously involved and the religiously affiliated did not differ. Religious themes were most often mentioned by respondents who were both religiously involved and members of a religious community (Table IV).

*Performers.* How do the results from the questionnaire relate to the picture that emerged from the interviews with performers? First, the performers correctly estimated that the audience was strongly moved by the opera. They concluded this, among other things, from the delay before the audience started applauding at the end of the opera. After the awesome scene in which the guillotine falls for each of the nuns, and finally for Constance and Blanche, the audience had difficulty breaking the silence. For Marcel Reijans (The Knight), co-operating in this opera was one of the highlights of his career, partly because of the reaction of the audience:

Never before have I seen an impact like the one this opera had. All of it, the way it is staged, the music, the content, has a very strong influence on the people. It incites them to think about death, their own death, the death of their fellows, the death of people close to them that they have witnessed. I have heard that people need about ten minutes before they can go on again, because it is a very impressive story. It is beautiful to experience that people get so much out of it, more than just distraction or a nice evening.

Kathryn Harries (Mother Marie) had the same experience, and thinks the way the opera is performed is responsible for this: "I think this production is so simple and clear and effective, it gives you food for thought instead of just showing you a pretty picture."

The strength of the music and the direction, expressed in the questionnaire by the many people for whom the music and direction made the strongest appeal, are stressed by the performers as well. The music of Poulenc is experienced by the performers as beautiful and interesting. The conductor, Yves Abel, says: "Poulenc was immensely sensitive. He had an amazing understanding of humanity." To strengthen the contemplative effect of the opera, the director, Robert Carsen, chose not to use scenery. The stage was designed as one large, open space, without any visual distractions. In this way, attention focused fully on the acting and singing. The production demanded a high degree of concentration and commitment from the performers. For instance, in scenes in which the nuns are praying, Carsen asked them to really pray, instead of faking it. In directing the opera, he chose to stress the inner process Blanche and the other nuns were going through: "The opera works merely from the inside. At the end, there is catharsis." The audience understood his intention. On the open question of what aspect of the opera appealed most to the respondents, most answers that deal with content point to inner processes. To give a few examples: "The human process: how to live (and to die) with fear of death/life,"

“Agony,” “The contrast between death that is accepted and death that is not accepted,” “Faithfulness,” “The austerity and yet the expression of feelings, especially fear of death and struggling and submission” and “Finding the courage to accept the consequences of one’s choice.” As for the performers, they feel strengthened in the expression of inner processes by the force of the music and direction.

As mentioned before, many of the spectators could empathize with the opera; only a small number thought the opera strange. Many answers to the open question make it clear that respondents recognized themselves in the opera. We will give the following examples: “The convincing humanity of several characters,” “The lines are of all ages,” “Vital questions about death and the fears associated with our reality.” This is in keeping with what the performers see as the strength of the opera. All point out that every opera, but this one especially, is about universal human questions and emotions.

As we have seen in the previous section, the answer to the question of what appeals most in the opera is related to the religious involvement of the spectator. Among the performers as well, there are differences in this regard, which lead to differences in the interpretation of the opera. The influence of one’s outlook on life is especially clear in the interpretation of the final guillotine scene. Director Robert Carsen intended to give a positive interpretation of this scene. He says: “The guillotine scene [is] a catharsis, a release. It is a step on the way to, a voyage to grace. Therefore, I made it like a dance.” The performers interpreted this approach in different ways, depending on their religious backgrounds: a Catholic performer saw it as an “ultimate sacrifice”; for “a born-again Christian” it was clear that the scene is about resurrection, about being mercifully received in Heaven; and a (religious) humanist performer stressed that the opera has an open ending.

The performers related their roles in the opera to their own characters and backgrounds. For example, Gwynne Geyer recognized much of her own way of believing and religious doubts in the role of Madame Lidoine, the second prioress. Judith Forst said about performing the painful death agony of the first prioress: “It is an agonising scene. And for me personally it is extremely horrific because of my own life situation. My mother is not ill with cancer [as the dying prioress probably is; H.A., & H.Z.] but she has Alzheimer’s . . . and has not much quality of life.” From the comments of the performers, we conclude that the singers identify with their roles to a high degree. In this regard, it is characteristic that some of them change from the third person to the first person when talking about the role they perform.

The interviews also make clear that the mutual involvement among the women plays an important role in the opera. According to Kathryn Harries, this opera differs in important ways from others because of its large number of female roles.

You do have a huge sense of community. And that adds a dynamism to the project, which is lacking very often to that level. And because you are in that community, it sort of stimulates your imagination. It does encourage you far more than a normal opera to think what it must have been like for those people. It does make you think—what must have it been like for those women to work out that sort of threat. What a test of faith, what a test of courage.

The alliance with one another also manifested itself during the rehearsals. Judith Forst described this as follows:

In the rehearsal period, often the men were excluded without our even thinking about it. The women came together, and the men—we pushed them away, though we didn’t mean to. It’s funny to see this happen. The women bond, it happens every time, and they become very close. And it is not like an opera where there is a big star soprano, and a big star tenor; it is not what this piece is about, it is about sharing feelings, and in the rehearsal period, this happened.

Some answers to the open question in the questionnaire make clear that this alliance can be felt by the audience: “The uniting of the nuns,” “The women uniting,” “Strength of women,” “The love of the first prioress for Blanche,” “The solidarity between the nuns.” We may conclude that both audience and performers caught the prevalent theme of femininity in Poulenc’s work. Nevertheless, the answers to the questionnaire made clear that the opera did not appeal more or differently to women than to men.

#### *Reviews*<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to read about the reception of the opera’s first productions in Milan and Paris, respectively (Gendre, 1999, pp. 307–310). According to Gendre, in Paris “the psychological and spiritual aspects were accentuated,” and the production was characterized by “austere, stark staging” with “monastically inspired sets.” “The public especially appreciated the profound identity the singers had with their role.” (ibid, p. 309). This could have been one of the reviews of the production in the Amsterdam Muziektheater and is similar to those actually written.

The reception of the opera by the critics was very positive. They especially praised the way it was staged, the music and the dramatic qualities of the singers. One of the critics characterizes the music as human, vulnerable, full of concentrated emotions, secret seductions, hesitations and soft tears. Yet, it amazes him that an opera “which has in all soberness only praying, talking and dying Carmelites to offer, can make such a deep impression” (*Het Parool*, March 8, 2002). Most critics relate the evocative power of the opera in the first place to the stylized choreography, set and lighting. There is more difference of opinion about the music and the way that it is performed. There is only one critic who doubts whether Poulenc’s opera can impress a broader public, due to its Catholic theme and background. The mystical element of the “mediation of grace” in particular is according to him hardly understandable for outsiders. However, this analysis of the content of the opera was written in advance of the performances in the Muziektheater and without reference to other productions. Interestingly, only in this and one other article published in advance is the theme of grace mentioned; all the other reviews confine themselves to stressing the role of anxiety.

#### **Conclusion**

The leading questions in our empirical research were: To what extent are Poulenc’s intentions understood and taken up by performers and audience? What is the effect of the opera on the audience and performers? (Are people being affected on the existential, spiritual and religious level? Does this religious-existential opera bring a modern secularized opera-audience into contact with religious meanings?). With regard to the first question, we found that many of the performers we interviewed had extensively studied source material. They were well acquainted with the background of the opera. Yet, they differ in their interpretations of the work. Except for Gwynne Geyer, who explicitly defines herself as a Christian, the performers pay more attention to existential than to religious themes in the opera. They appreciate the balanced and impressive way in which Poulenc deals with these questions. We see the same pattern in the replies of the audience. Only people who are both religiously involved and a member of a religious community refer to the explicitly religious content of the opera. They do this with great sensitivity to what Poulenc wanted to

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<sup>14</sup>See note 10.

express. The critics do not delve very deeply into Poulenc's intentions. For them, the opera is about anxiety, and they appreciate the fact that religious aspects are presented in such a way that they are acceptable to the audience. Only two critics mention the Catholic theology on the "mediation of grace," one of whom doubts the appeal of the opera to a broader public. In the answers of the audience to our questionnaire, we find no indications for the special relevance of this theme. Yet, it does not deter people either: The opera offers enough on an existential level to be recognisable.

Regarding the question of what the opera evoked in our respondents, we can conclude without hesitation that *Dialogues des Carmélites* had a strong impact. The respondents indicate that they were greatly moved. According to the psychologist Nico Frijda, being moved is the pre-eminent characteristic of the aesthetic emotions (Frijda, 1986, pp. 355–358). Every emotional perception brings with it a "relational action preparedness": a tendency to relate to an object. In the case of being moved, the tendencies are "submission, admiration, awe, reverence" (Van der Lans, 1998, p. 21). "The moving piece of art is recognised as something larger than ourselves, something to which we can entrust ourselves" (Frijda, 1986, pp. 357–358). This characterization calls our attention to important similarities between the aesthetic emotion and religious feelings. Many researchers point to the comparability of the psychological processes underlying the aesthetic and religious experiences (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989; Pruyser, 1992; Van der Lans, 1998; Watts, & Williams, 1988). With regard to our respondents, we can conclude that the overall high score on the item "moving" indicates that their reaction comes close to religious feelings. However, psychologists of religion who define religion in terms of a religious tradition stress the specific influence of that tradition. For the aesthetic emotion to result in a specific religious experience and religious action tendencies, like praying, the situation causing the emotion has to be interpreted from a religious frame of reference (Van der Lans, 1998, pp. 20–32). In our research, only the open question about what appealed most to the respondents informs us about their religious frames of reference, providing they gave a religious answer to this question. Such an answer was most often given by respondents who were both religiously involved and members of a religious community. For these people, the evocative power of the opera gained a specific religious flavour. However, for the majority of the respondents, the opera fits in with a religious sensitivity in the broader sense of the word, connected with the awareness of human finitude and transcendence.

The performers, many of the visitors and the critics relate the fact that this religious opera is attractive to a secular audience to its aesthetic qualities. We think they are right. The high standard of direction, musical direction and performance was responsible for its strong evocative power. Furthermore, it is important that the performers succeeded not only in shaping their roles very personally, stimulating people to identify with the play, but also in leaving room for several interpretations. Poulenc himself achieved the same thing both in the music and in the libretto. He succeeded in raising universal, existential questions without trying to answer them unequivocally.

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